DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 157 272 EC 111 757

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TITLE Human Rights and Special Education in the Developing Countries.
PUB DATE Jun 78
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the World Congress on Future Special Education (First, Stirling, Scotland, June 25 - July 1, 1978)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Civil Liberties; Educational Trends; Elementary Secondary Education; *Foreign Countries; *Handicapped Children; *Special Education
IDENTIFIERS *Latin America

ABSTRACT

The paper provides some significant data, from the economic, social, cultural, and educational context, on some of the obstacles to fundamental rights in Latin America; and deals with special education in these countries, its scope and resources, and the attitudes and philosophical assumptions which help or hinder its expansion. Among recommendations for the future are that specific action be undertaken to prevent social causes attacking those children who are more liable to aggression and that funds be appropriated for more research. (SBH)

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174
AUG 1 1978

First World Congress
on Future Special Education
Session 3

Monday, June 26 1:30 - 3:30

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HUMAN RIGHTS AND SPECIAL EDUCATION IN THE DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

Berta P. de Braslavsky

1. RIGHTS OF THE DISABLED PERSONS
   Our analysis and objectives

2. SPECIAL EDUCATION IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN AREA

   2.1. Some significant data from the context
   2.1.1. Economic behaviour
   2.1.2. Human development and social change
   2.1.3. Urbanization and superimposition of cultures
   2.1.4. Educational situation
   2.1.5. Interference against essential rights

   2.2. Problems of special education
   2.2.1. Extent and Resources
   2.2.2. Attitudes
   2.2.3. Education's philosophics assumptions

3. SPECIAL EDUCATION'S PROJECTIONS INTO THE FUTURE
   Present generation's responsibilities

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1. HUMAN RIGHTS AND SPECIAL EDUCATION IN THE DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

Our analysis and objectives

Among the reflexions about the future made in the decade of the seventies, we can list the long term analyses and projections elaborated by several organisms of the United Nations Organization. They are different from other resounding and quite controversial models, in as much as they do not purpose to prevent the supposed catastrophes that threaten the survival of the human species but rather deal with aims directed toward the realization of a more equitable society (Seynes de Philippe, 1977).

With reference to this, the Declaration on the Rights of the Disabled persons proclaimed by the General Assembly on December 9, 1975, has as its foundation its faith in the human rights and fundamental freedom, and in the principles of peace, dignity and worthy of the human person and of social justice proclaimed in the Charter of the United Nations by the Member States.

In one of its points, the Declaration underscores the 'awareness of the fact that due to their present level of development, some countries are not in the position to dedicate more than limited efforts to these activities'. (United Nations, 1976).

We propose to identify some rather well known facts that in the 'developing' countries keep hindering the incorporation of the disabled into normal social life. We shall limit our analysis to the region of Latin America and the Caribbean which has, among its differences from other areas including Third World countries, the fact of having started the achievement of their political independence over a century and a half ago under the influence of

the ideas that postulated the rights of man. Those ideas shaped the basic assumptions of the educational policies of these countries until three decades ago when such assumptions were superseded by others.

My paper will be in two parts. The first part will give some significant data from the economic, social, cultural and educational context, on some of the obstacles to fundamental rights in Latin America.

The second part, will deal with the problems of special education in these conditions, its scope and resources and with the attitudes and philosophical assumptions which help or hinder its expansion.

Time does not allow me to do more than present the main points to you and provide food for thought on the future of special education.

2. SPECIAL EDUCATION IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

2.1. SOME SIGNIFICANT DATA FROM THE CONTEXT

2.1.1. ECONOMIC BEHAVIOUR

According to the analysis of 1976 data, the rates of growth experienced in certain fields seem to confirm that the Latin America region holds an intermediate position between the industrialized countries and the most backward countries of Asia and Africa. While being aware of the differences covered under these total figures, we take this to be the result of a stronger structural solidity achieved by Latin America because of a certain diversification in the system of production and the development of industrial activities. (Iglesias, E. V., 1977).

Contrasting with the facts leading to an optimistic interpretation, although somewhat modified by certain trends during 1977, the income imbalance is getting worse. In 1969, the most favoured groups (5%) concentrated an income 46 times that of the least favoured (20%) (Conference of Ministers of Education, 1971). The steep growth of the inflationary process that in 1976 went over that for the preceding years, considerably increases the gap between the two groups.

2.1.2. HUMAN DEVELOPMENT AND SOCIAL CHANGE

The figures summarising human development and social change in the period 1960 to 1975, show also a slightly favourable evolution (Economic Commission for Latin America, 1976), although when analyzed separately, you find out that they always make remarkable differences from one country to the next. Let us give a few examples. The population rate of growth, which is the world's highest and does not decline, grades through a hierarchy going from Hondura's 3.5% to Uruguay's 1% and down to Barbado's 0.5%. Life expectancy runs from 60 or over 69 in Cuba, Uruguay and Argentina down to a minimum of 46-47 in Bolivia and Haiti. Infant mortality fluctuates from 0.9 in Cuba and 28.1 in Haiti. The indices summarising daily consumption show higher than minimum requirements figures for calories and proteins; but these figures conceal a discreet but serious case of undernourishment concerning countries that look well fed, as shown by the maps of hunger that have been drawn for countries like Argentina and Chile. (National Institute of Agricultural and Breeding Technology, 1974).

Growing inflation affects well over 80% of the people in Latin America (Iglesias, E. V., 1977). It is easy to foresee what deplorable consequences this will have on the nutritional level of the great majorities already de-

monstrated in the FAO Investigation.

2.1.3. URBANIZATION AND SUPERIMPOSITION OF CULTURES

Urbanization has further complicated the historical fact of the superimposition of cultures which began with the mixture of the native and Iberian with which the black was sometimes integrated.

Peasants migrating to the city find new cultural forms there and they in turn, bring their own which are more archaic and less penetrated by cultures from Europe and the USA. They bring their native tongues, dialect forms of Spanish and come into contact with others from different regions of the country and from Latin America and European countries. Children from this background are generally able to understand and speak the language of their environment but their own languages differ from those spoken by their teachers.

2.1.4. THE EDUCATIONAL SITUATION

In relative terms there has been a decrease in illiteracy between the years 1960 to 1975 and school enrollment has shown a significant increase at every level, (Economic Commission for Latin America).

In 7 to 13 age bracket, with the obvious fluctuations, total enrollment reached an 89.9% figure. With the exceptions of Haiti, Honduras and Paraguay, enrollment increases. Only two countries show a level under 60%.

Nevertheless, the formal system is ailing because of some serious problems: The dropping out and repeating problems can be seen as expressing a disturbing chronological backwardness affecting the students. It is easily verified between 50 and 70% of the total are one or more years older than what is considered as the normal age for the

corresponding class. (Conference of Ministers, 1971). Pre-school education as a necessary condition for cultural levelling and the prevention of school problems is extremely precarious, although Latin America can be acknowledged as enjoying a somewhat better standard than the African continent. Nevertheless, the region's level is quite lower than that of the developed regions. Africa, 0.22. Latin America, 3.36. North America, 14.91. Europe, 23.99. USSR, 47.28%. (UNESCO Statistical Yearbook 1974).

2.1.5. INTERFERING WITH THE ESSENTIAL RIGHTS

Some of the observed facts objectively interfere with the right of an overwhelming majority to health, well-being, education and work. As an extension of this, the same facts become like hurdles that get in the way of the rights of the disabled. Furthermore, such facts are fuel for arguments about the extension of the field of special education. They lead to positive and negative attitudes, and to disputes about responsibilities. Some times they even reverse causality relations in the analysis of the aetiology of this or that problem.

2.2. PROBLEMS OF SPECIAL EDUCATION

2.2.1. EXTENT AND RESOURCES

In the process of defining the extension of the field of special education, hard facts are often substituted by conjectures.

The pauperisation of the large majorities, undernourishment, lack of availabilities in health care, as well as the considerable numbers of students whose class level is definitely behind their chronological age and many

other facts lead us to suspect a higher frequency of persons with special needs than in those countries with a higher economic development and a better social and education status. Such an assumption is logically consistent and contains part of the truth, while conjectures are usually the result of working with controversial definitions which are full of confusions and prejudices, particularly so in the areas of mental retardation and learning disabilities. Care must then be exercised in order to avoid the quantification of needs. The task must wait till the time when we are ready to carry it out in the required conditions of scientific precision.

For the time being, it is only possible to examine what we know about the formal system of special education. Some dependable data are available but they do not include all the countries in the region, among them one as important as Brazil. (UNESCO Statistical Yearbook, 1974).

All over the subcontinent the right of disabled to special education is formally accepted. It is supposed to be implicit in the right to education proclaimed by the Constitution of every country in the region. In some of these countries - Guatemala, Costa Rica, Venezuela and others - there are specific provisions in the law about special education. But for all practical purposes, the facts are not living up to what the letter promises.

During the second and third decades of the century, at least Argentina, Uruguay, and Mexico, started the parasystem of special education, mainly through the action of the State under the jurisdiction of the Ministry

of Education. In other countries it began several decades ago for the sensorially defficient. Their care was extended to the mentally retarded students approximately in the fifties and sixties. Later on they directed their attention to the crippled and then, in the more recent years, to those with learning disabilities. As a general rule, the initiative came from private groups. Only later did the State assume their responsibility concerning the right of the disabled. And only recently, is this right getting recognition both in the law and in the facts. The starting level is the school, training for work follows in the precarious line of progress. A policy of early intervention in experimental centres has already been implemented, sometimes in a coordinated effort by the Ministries of Labour, Education and Health.

The attempts of integration into the mainstream are, so far, few and isolated. The concept of the parallel system usually prevails. In the area of mental retardation, most of the children being taken care of are mild cases, often wrongly labelled. Pupils who are moderate, profound or severe cases are, as a rule, taken care of by private schools or boarding institutions under the supervision of the Ministry of Health.

There are some centres for the training of human resources, usually at the level of higher education, in several countries.

2.2.2. Attitudes

As far as the attitudes of people with special needs in Latin America are concerned, we only have some inferences based on empirical observations.

The rights of individuals with special needs are becoming recognised by more and more people every day.

Parents organizations have been active in this process and a great role has been assumed by the International League of Societies for the Mentally Handicapped (ILSMH).

The democratization of life which is going on, the political vicissitudes of a great many of our countries not withstanding, has had a positive influence in the increase of responsiveness within some power groups, economically and politically speaking. Groups in the position of generating considerable pressure on the State are in several countries a source of growing assistance in favour of the special education.

Unfortunately, these attitudes - positive at the beginning - may sometimes turn into negative ones. In order to exert a stronger pressure, particularly in the privileged area of mental retardation figures presumed to express the truth are taken for granted concerning rates and made into assumptions that go with extreme ease from 30 to 70%. These jumping assumptions are hungrily grabbed by sentationalist press and TV and served as facts so that certain of the behaviour patterns of marginal groups are misconstrued as proof of mental retardation. Scientific events have seen the production of documents about the dangers of population explosion, meant as evidence of a fast and threating increase in mental retardation. This is then construed as an uncontrollable source of antisocial phenomena, from delinquency to drug addiction. Mental retardation has been sometimes pointed at as a danger imperilling social stability in Latin America.

Panic works against the principle of normalization which postulates social acceptance, both as a condition and as a result of integration into the regular system of education, work and living. Panic is particularly negative in that it opposes integration to work in countries within the region which present a high rate of unemployment. In that context, a disabled person is the first victim of this terribly serious social problem.

Millenarian prejudices are still operative in Latin America, as are other factors that have contributed to the delay in recognizing the right of the disabled. To make matters worse, some concepts and hypotheses applied and generalized with neither critical analysis nor caution have also been influential particularly as far as mental retardation is concerned. We like specifically to refer to the I.Q., concept, so schematic and dangerous and, on top of it all, arrived at through the agency of instruments that have been standardised in developed countries, where cultural systems are differently shaped; and to the classification based on socio-environmental etiology which assimilates the syndromes of mental retardation to some of the problems present in certain social groups facing the necessity of becoming integrated into a school environment usually rigid and indifferent. As well as to the unwarranted generalizations about undernourishment as a cause of irreversible mental retardation, and many other such extropolations.

Irresponsible generalizations can negatively label large human groups in Third World countries and picture these countries as being predominantly inhabited by mentally handicapped people. Behind such attitudes, it is easy for some observers to detect political intentions and

consequences. This kind of propaganda, it is feared, would end up freezing - parallel to the division in developed and underdeveloped countries - another classification separating intelligent from unintelligent countries. Such a conclusion would be a brilliant justification for the 'white man's burden' assumption with its inevitable sequel of tutelage and neocolonialism. (Braslavsky B. P. de - 1970, 1973, 1974, 1976, 1976).

2.2.3. EDUCATION'S PHILOSOPHIC ASSUMPTIONS

The traditional model born at the beginning of the XIXth century with the national independence movements saw education as a right of every individual and as an obligation binding the State. This model considered elementary education as a priority for the well-advised exercise of citizenship and conferred upon it a character of universality. It recognized in education one of the basic tools for taking the country out of the pit of economic and political backwardness, though this was not seen as its primary mission.

One hundred and thirty years later, the ideas of economic "desarrollismo" came into being. This expression seems to be typically Latin American and has no English counterpart. 'Desarrolismo', - which comes from 'desarrollo', Spanish meaning 'development' - , emphasises financial investment in heavy industry, mechanised farming, urban construction, above any other kind of social effort, as 'the' way to a better life for all. This doctrine seems to place more faith in what the school can do than in what society needs in the area of structural changes. Education was seen as an investment for the production growth. Investment favouring the intermediate level - from which a

better return is expected - thus taking priority off the elementary level and acting in a forgetfulness of the traditional model based on the concept of human rights.

After fifteen years of this policy, towards the end of the sixties, all over the region one comes to the realization that the absolute number of illiterates has increased and that large sections of the population either desert the school or stay out of the system altogether. Systematic education is heavily criticised because it is too academic and too bureaucratic. The radical critics suggest the elimination of such a useless system but purpose to apply in its place rather vague or utopian solutions. Other reformers suggest further reductions in the investment for elementary education, whose budget is already so thin. (Solari, A., 1977).

Both developmental theory and the most among the ones opposing it are far from favouring the validity of the right of the disabled to education. The priority concept meant offering education to normal people, and let the children with special requirements wait, but the desarrollismo project means looking down upon these children with contempt.

Notwithstanding, it has been shown in many developed countries that most of the people with special needs are highly productive men and women and, therefore, their education is not a cost related to the duty of respecting human rights but represents, also, a profitable investment. This must be proved to be the case even in underdeveloped countries.

3. SPECIAL EDUCATION IN ITS REFLEXIONS ON THE FUTURE

Special education is involved in the future evolution of the entire system and, further, with the economic and social context working under the influence of colonialism and neocolonialism. The idea of an international economic order based on equality and mutual interest as a solution - or prevention - of future disputes will, perhaps, make some headway.

An outstanding Uruguayan philosopher of education says that 'as education is a social phenomenon any changes in it can only come as a result of other previous changes in the social system.' (Solari, A., 1977).

Hopefully, those changes will eliminate most of the non-genetic factors restraining the field of special education. And, further, they would reinstate the conception of the human rights and the ground upon which education is based and make better known the evidence showing the productivity of handicapped people. When this comes to be, the boundaries limiting the budgets for education will not be determined by other costs serving only the cause of human destruction and alienation. Only then will special education be automatically included as a first priority as a natural sequel to the principles of normalization and integration.

In order to fill the gap between actual reality and future progress, which is no longer utopian, we propose some immediate and feasible steps according to the context of each country.

We propose a measure of general basic and massive intervention in order to suppress the social causes of mental retardation and other defficiencies. (Dybwad, G., 1974).

At the same time, a specific action must be undertaken in order to prevent such causes attacking those children who are more liable to the aggression.

We demand that funds be appropriated here and now for more, new research. With the recommendation that the results be openly communicated in a responsible and objective way, introducing no other purpose but that of making truth known to all once it has been thoroughly and definitely tested. We ask that definitions be unambiguously expressed. And insist in demanding that the research be continued for instruments and methods of evaluation other than the standard tests that applied out of context are nothing but dispensers of labels of mental retardation.

One of the fundamental premises of UNESCO, should be invoked again: 'The cause of the inefficiency of the school is naturally out of the school, but also within it'. The educational systems are interdependent. As a result, any qualitative improvement in the regular school will be felt in the field of special education. In the developing countries, where special education is just beginning to organize, the opportunity to start and grow following the principles of prevention, integration and normalisation must not be wasted.

The success of these plans and the change of the context within which they are achieved, is our responsibility at present, in relation to the following generations.

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